

NYS Council on the Arts 1969-70

Chairman's Review

The ten years in which the New York State Council on the Arts has existed have witnessed the emergence of arts councils in every state in the union and the creation of the National Council on the Arts, the Associated Councils of the Arts, and the Division of the Humanities and the Arts in the New York State Education Department. In terms of legislative recognition it has been an unprecedented decade for the arts in America. Yet the same years have repeatedly seen the arts in financial crisis and, with increasing frequency, we have heard the cry that arts institutions are not serving the needs of the total community. The telling question now that legislative support of the arts has been established is—how well does the structure work?

A look at our own current Council programs is as good a starting point as any for an evaluation. The Touring Program, Traveling Exhibitions, and Technical Assistance, all started in the early years, continue to be an integral part of Council activities. The Film Program and the Poets and Writers Program were added later, and this year a new and exciting program called The Composer in Performance offers opportunities for modern composers to conduct their own works. All of these programs respond directly to community needs and requests; they also rely heavily on local initiative and impetus, leaving the selection of art and artists with the community. The Council has developed in them a means of using small sums to achieve large purposes and to set in motion processes that multiply. This "seed money" technique has proved to be highly successful, and many other state arts councils have adopted it with equal success.

Since the artist and his audience are interdependent the Council has sought new ways to bring the two together. One new project involving the AFL-CIO is testing ways of interesting union members in the arts. Studies are being conducted to find ways the arts can be meaningful to such diverse special groups as New York State Indians and prison inmates. A grant under the Ghetto Arts Program has brought the arts to patients in New York State mental hospitals.

Using the foundation technique of grant giving, the Council has responded more directly to some of the needs of arts institutions and artist groups. Museum Aid and the Festival Program work exclusively in this manner. The area of concern has broadened to include jazz, multimedia, and modern dance, and recent grants have funded an opera costume bank and a massive performance and residency program with the State University of New York. Children's theatre has been a particular concern of the Council for some time, and this year funds from the National Council on the Arts are assisting the Council as it attempts to study the theatre that is created for and available to children.

Some Council programs were inconceivable ten years ago. The past decade has been a period in which the arts have had growing recognition as instruments of social change and expression. In 1961 the Council would have been accused of dabbling in social work if it had funded a Harlem theatre group; now it supports street theatres and coffee houses that encourage self-expression. Many of the beneficiaries move outside of traditional

forms and institutions. In the past they have often been designated as "amateur," but in the near future they may well bring us to abandon that term in connection with them.

In the past several years many New York State municipalities attempted to reduce racial tension during the summer months by offering ghetto residents arts and recreation programs. Inadvertently, they helped to bring to light artists who would speak for the ghettos—artists who existed within the communities and had something to say about their lives there. The Ghetto Arts Program seeks to develop these artists by giving them an audience, a training ground, and a place to experiment. Hopefully, it will also help to place them in the larger art world so that the now disquieting title of "ghetto arts" will no longer be needed.

Other Council programs provide additional instances of activity that abandons traditional attitudes toward art. A study undertaken this year investigates means of using the arts to relieve the sense of individual isolation evident in metropolitan fringe areas. An experimental program in ten upstate communities assists youth centers in developing communication between the community and its teen-agers by encouraging the "art of participation."

How much of this "social" experimentation should the Council allow itself when established performing arts institutions are in serious financial trouble? And how, in any case, are we to answer the larger needs of our museums, symphonies, and opera companies—with new funds or with new approaches to their functions? We have made little contribution to date in the battle of rising artistic costs, and we must look for ways to promote long-range health rather than wasting ourselves on temporary stays against ultimate disaster. Perhaps a Performing Arts Aid Program similar to our present Museum Aid Program would offer an answer as we try to help failing institutions find new ways to meet artist and community demands for more meaningful and relevant programs.

I have been privileged to be chairman of the New York State Council on the Arts for these past ten years and have viewed its workings at close range. Its accomplishments can be traced to Governor Rockefeller's careful appointments to membership, its three executive directors—Laurance Roberts, John H. MacFadyen, and John B. Hightower—and its dedicated staff. The arts continue to serve as an expression of man's feelings about himself and the world around him. More than ever, both in what they say and in the new forms they are using to say it, artists are reflecting disenchantment with old systems and institutions that are unsatisfying and unworkable. Underlying whatever success the Council has achieved has been its ability, if not to produce change, at least to respond effectively to it. We must never lose the ability and willingness to take stock anew. The channel for change must be kept open.

Seymour H. Knox